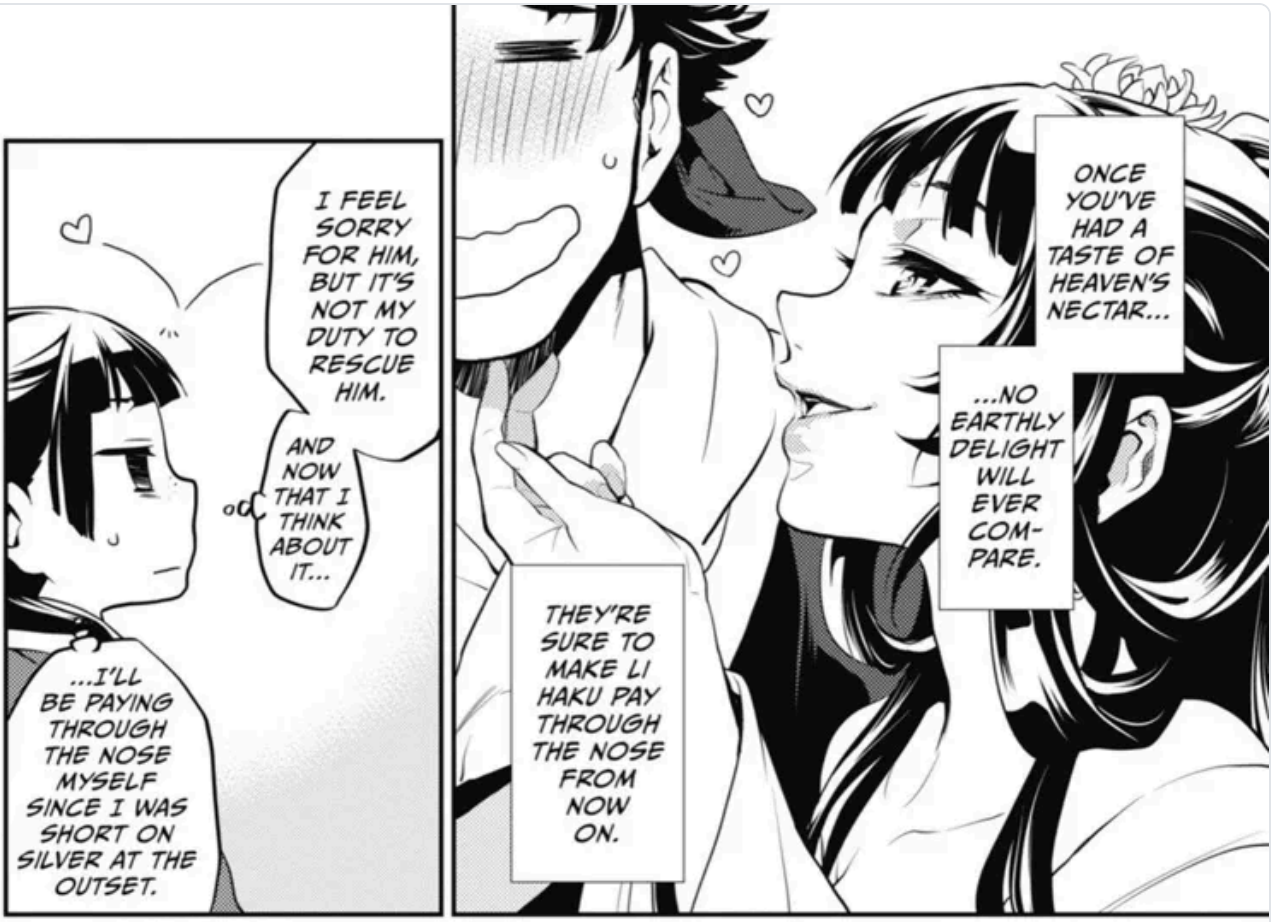
Chapter 13
MY THREE-DAY TRIP HOME CAME AND WENT IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.
VERDIGRIS
MAO-MAO!
LEAVING ALREADY?
MM-HM.
I REALLY WISH I COULD STAY.
BUT IT'LL JUST MAKE TROUBLE FOR SIR LI HAKU IF I ABANDON MY WORK AT THE INNER COURT.
AWW, WHAT A SHAME!
ISN'T THAT RIGHT, MY DEAR SIR?
OH! SURE IS!
BLUSH BLUSH
YEEAAH, IT'S TRULY A PITY.
FEEL
FEEL
LOOKS LIKE HE HAD A NICE DREAM.
...TOO NICE.
I THINK HE MIGHT'VE EMPTIED MY PURSE ALTO-GETHER.


I FEEL SORRY FOR HIM, BUT IT'S NOT MY DUTY TO RESCUE HIM.
AND NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT...
...I'LL BE PAYING THROUGH THE NOSE MYSELF SINCE I WAS SHORT ON SILVER AT THE OUTSET.
ONCE YOU'VE HAD A TASTE OF HEAVEN'S NECTAR...
...NO EARTHLY DELIGHT WILL EVER COM-PARE.
THEY'RE SURE TO MAKE LI HAKU PAY THROUGH THE NOSE FROM NOW ON.

SHE'S ALREADY GOT A BUYER IN MIND FOR ME ONCE MY TIME IN THE INNER COURT IS UP, HASN'T SHE?
HEE! HEE! HEE!
HEE! HEE!
AND JUST LOOK AT THAT LEERING FACE...

EXACTLY WHAT KIND OF SADIST...
...IS THIS OLD BAG PLANNING ON SELLING ME TO?
GRIN
GRIN

AND SO, I MADE MY WAY BACK TO THE JADE PALACE.
HOW-EVER...
WHAT'S GOING ON?
Chapter 13 The Misunderstanding

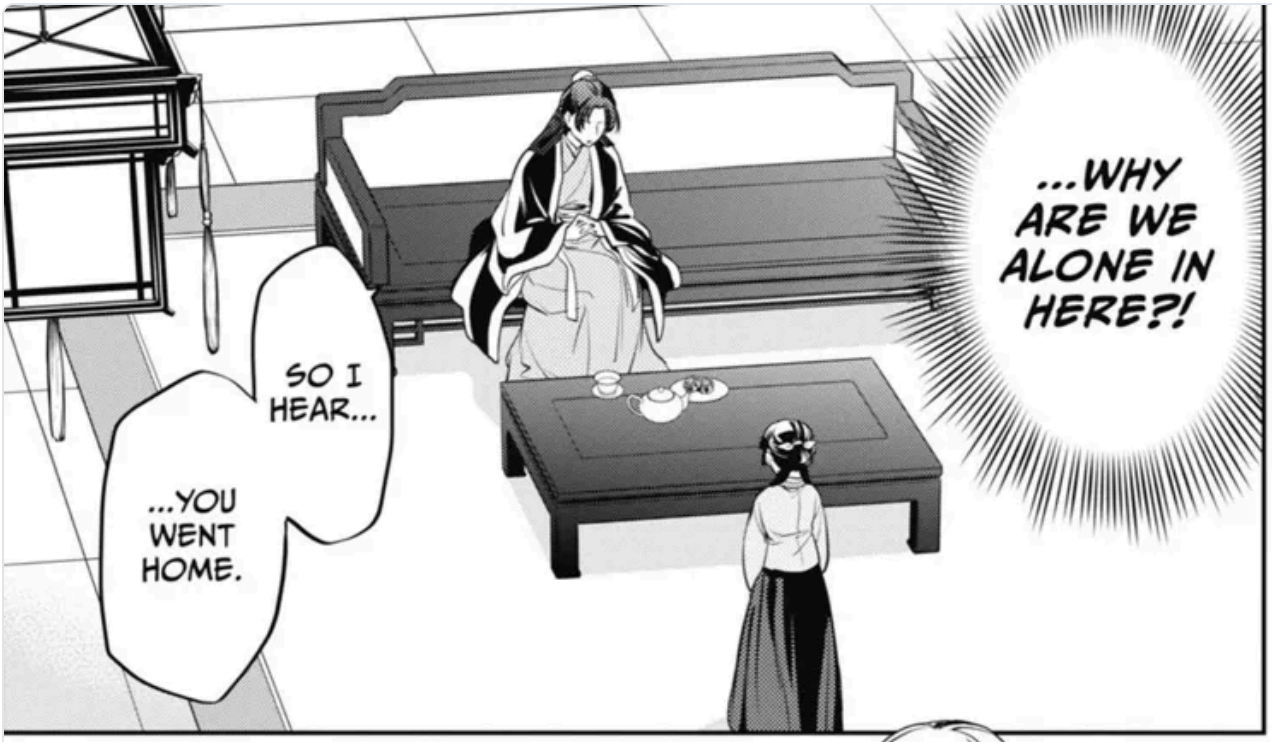
INTENSE PRESSURE
圧
WHY HAS HE BEEN GLARING AT ME EVER SINCE I GOT BACK?
GRAB
I THINK IT MIGHT BE BEST TO GET OUT OF HERE AS SOON AS I CAN.
BOW
GO DROP OFF YOUR THINGS.
I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU IN THE RECEP-TION ROOM.

TURN
ふいっ
SHUDDER
SHUDDER
SHUDDER

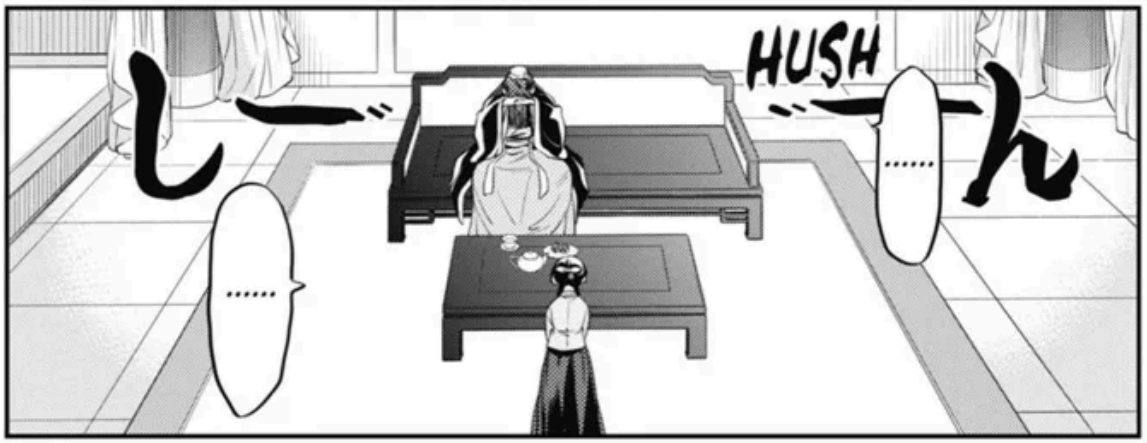
EXCITED
わくわく
EXCITED
わくわく
WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT?

149

DO YOU HAVE NEED OF ME?
BUT ...
HE SEEMS FAR MORE INTENSE THAN USUAL.
COULD JUST BE MY IMAGI-NATION.
I DO SO HOPE THAT'S WHAT IT IS.
YOU KNOW, I THINK I'LL PRETEND THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT. YES.
150


...WHY ARE WE ALONE IN HERE?!
SO I HEAR...
...YOU WENT HOME.

OH YES?
I DID.
I WAS RELIEVED TO FIND EVERY-ONE WELL.
HOW WAS THE TRIP ...?


HUSH
.....
.....

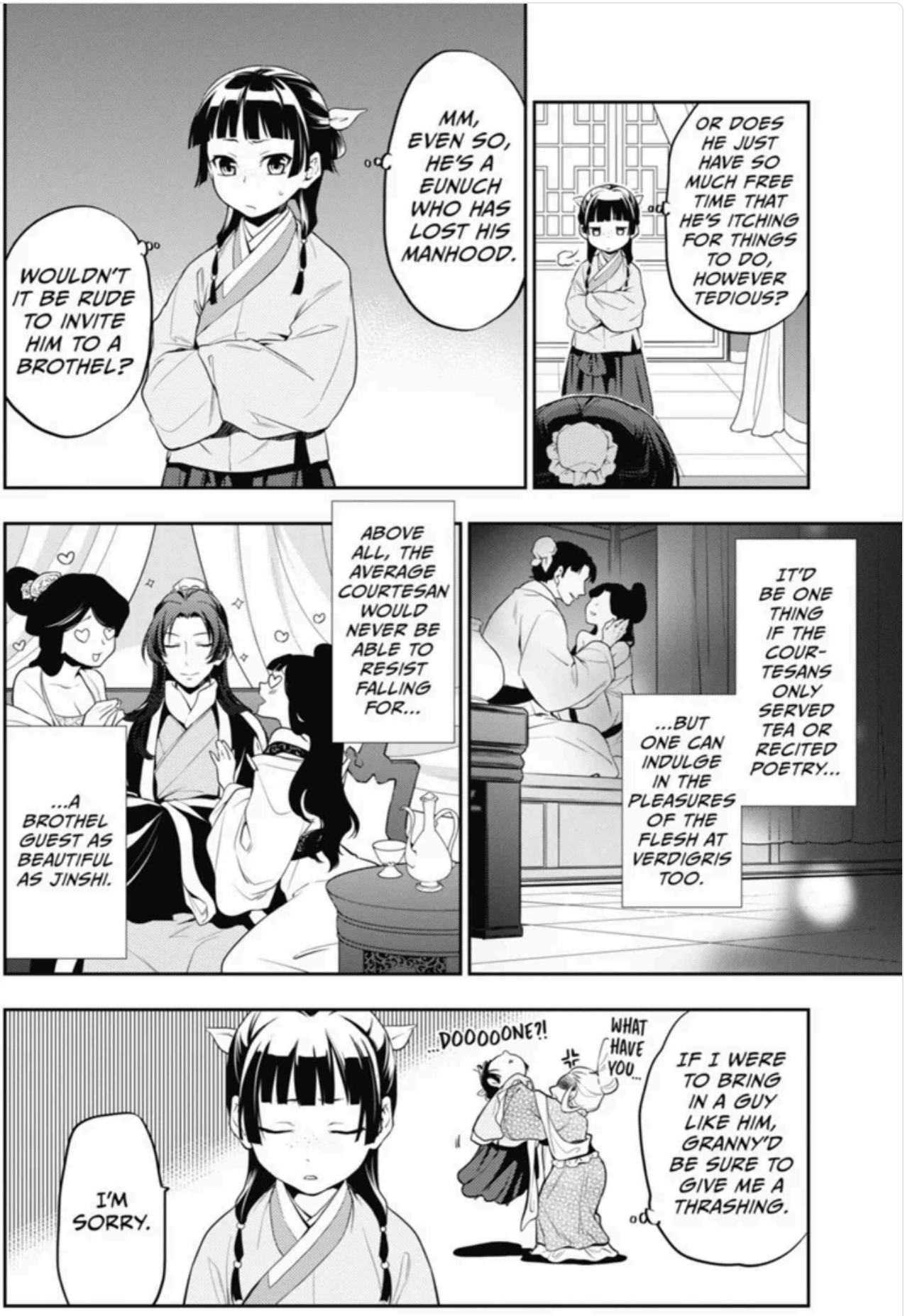
SO...
...THIS LI HAKU...
JUST WHO IS HE?
HOW DOES HE KNOW THAT NAME?
MY PATRON.
AND A SOON-TO-BE-REGULAR AT VERDI-GRIS.
A VITAL SOURCE OF REV-ENUE.
イラ
ANNOYED
DO YOU TRULY UNDER-STAND...
...WHAT THAT MEANS?
イラ
ANNOYED
WHAT'S HE GETTING SO UPSET ABOUT?

ど
AGHAST
っ
YES.
ONE MUST BE AN OFFICIAL IN GOOD STANDING AND OF GOOD BACK-GROUND ...
...TO VOUCH FOR ANOTHER.
WHAT'S WITH HIM?
IS IT BECAUSE I STATED THE OBVI-OUS?
...DID YOU GET A HAIRPIN FROM HIM?

153

YES.
ONE OF THE MANY HE APPEARED TO BE HANDING OUT AT RANDOM FOR THE SAKE OF DUTY.
LI HAKU IS GENEROUS.
HIS HAIRPIN MAY BE SIMPLE, BUT IT'S STURDY AND IN GOOD TASTE.
IT WOULD EVEN BE WORTH SELLING, SHOULD I EVER BE IN NEED.
SO...
...YOU'RE TELLING ME I LOST TO A HAIRPIN SOME LOUT FELT OBLIGED TO GIVE YOU?
"SOME LOUT" ...?
HE REALLY DOESN'T SEEM HIMSELF TODAY.

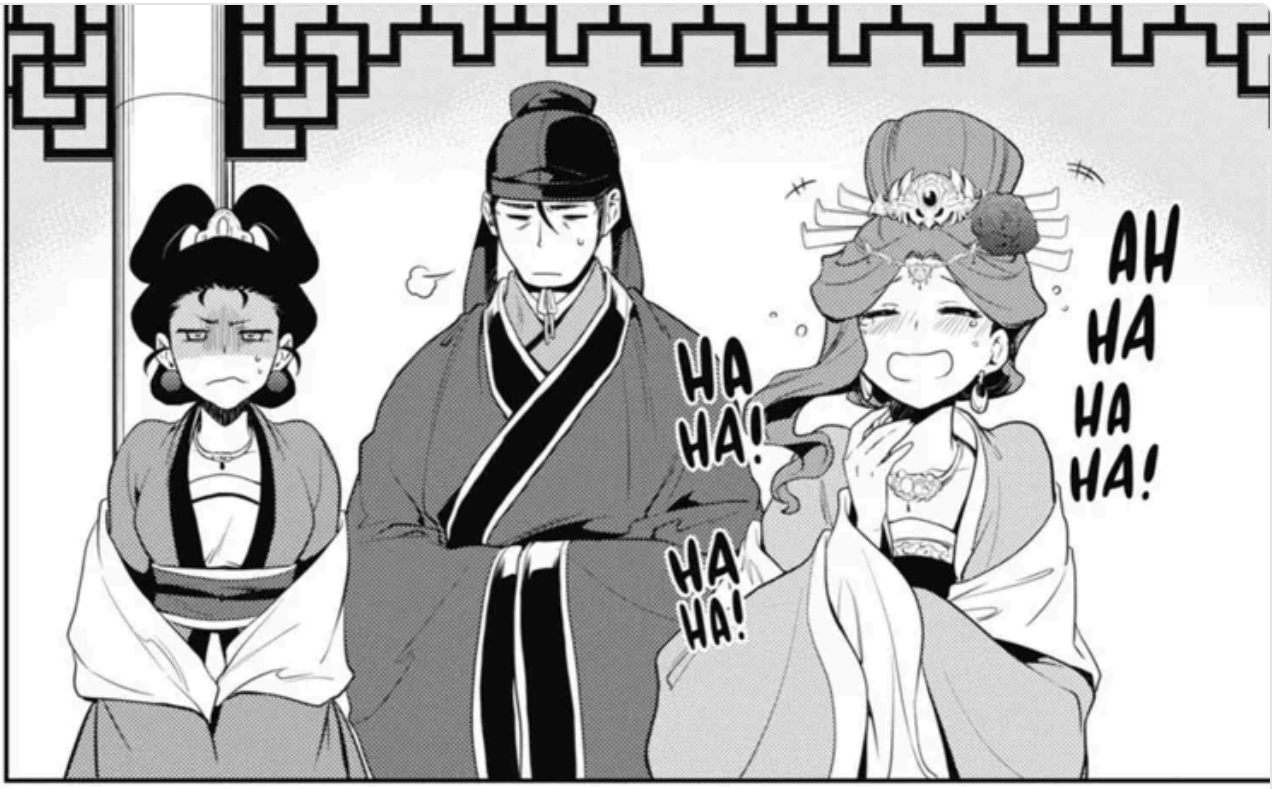
I GAVE YOU ONE TOO, DIDN'T I?
WHAT, YOU COULDN'T BE BOTHERED TO ASK ME?
HUH?
HOW CURIOUS.
BEING LEFT OUT OF THE IRKSOME AFFAIRS OF OTHERS IS SURELY A GOOD THING?
...UPSET THAT I DIDN'T GO TO HIM FOR HELP?
IS THE GREAT SIR JINSHI...
155


MM, EVEN SO, HE'S A EUNUCH WHO HAS LOST HIS MANHOOD.
WOULDN'T IT BE RUDE TO INVITE HIM TO A BROTHEL?
OR DOES HE JUST HAVE SO MUCH FREE TIME THAT HE'S ITCHING FOR THINGS TO DO, HOWEVER TEDIOUS?
ABOVE ALL, THE AVERAGE COURTESAN WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO RESIST FALLING FOR...
...A BROTHEL GUEST AS BEAUTIFUL AS JINSHI.
IT'D BE ONE THING IF THE COURTESANS ONLY SERVED TEA OR RECITED POETRY...
...BUT ONE CAN INDULGE IN THE PLEASURES OF THE FLESH AT VERDIGRIS TOO.
...DOOOOONE?!
WHAT HAVE YOU...
IF I WERE TO BRING IN A GUY LIKE HIM, GRANNY'D BE SURE TO GIVE ME A THRASHING.
I'M SORRY.

ピク TWITCH
I COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING YOU WOULD DEEM SATISFACTORY...
...WITH WHICH TO RETURN THE FAVOR.
OH YES.
WAIT. DID YOU GO ABOUT DOING THIS FOR LI HAKU?
RETURN THE FAVOR, YOU SAY?
OOH, LI HAKU, MY GOOD SIR...
I GAVE HIM A NIGHT TO REMEMBER, THE STUFF OF WHICH DREAMS ARE MADE.
KRAK

FROM THE STATE HE WAS IN, I DOUBT HE'LL COME BACK TO REALITY ANYTIME SOON.
TREMBLE
ふる
ふる
TREMBLE
WHEW!
I TOO WAS HAPPY TO SEE THAT MY EFFORTS DIDN'T GO TO WASTE.
I BELIEVE HE WAS THOROUGHLY SATIATED.
ガタ
STARTLE
ガタ
CLENCH
I'LL HAVE TO KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK FOR THE CLIENTELE SEARCH TOO.

SMAA
パリィ
AASH
イィン
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
WAIT A MINUTE, WON'T YOU? I'LL GET SOMETHING TO WIPE IT UP.
...OH DEAR.
YOU SPILLED ALL YOUR TEA.


HA HA!
HA HA!
AH HA HA HA!

OWW!
ぱしっ
SMACK

?

HOW LONG DO YOU INTEND TO MOPE?

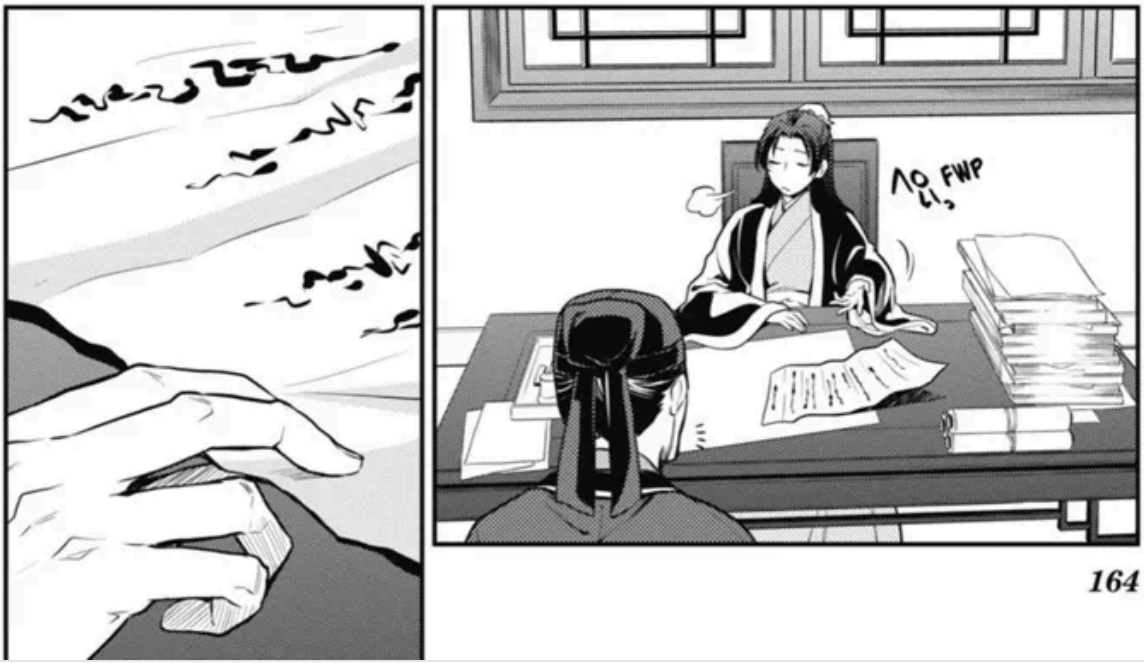
I DON'T THINK YOU DO.
I KNOW... I KNOW!
PLEASE DON'T FORGET THIS IS THE MIDDLE OF THE WORKDAY.
I'M DOING NO SUCH THING.
...WOULD NEVER GIVE SUCH A CHILDISH REPLY.
THE JINSHI I KNOW...
...WOULD NEVER BECOME SO PROFOUNDLY ATTACHED TO A PLAYTHING.
THE JINSHI I KNOW...

AFTER THE FIASCO IN THE RECEP-TION ROOM ...
POM ぽん
FLIP ペラ
FLIP ペラ
HERE, MORE WORK FOR YOU.
ドサッ
FWUMP
...I TOOK PAINS TO WORM THE DETAILS OUT OF CONSORT GYOKUYO, WHO WAS BESIDE HERSELF WITH LAUGHTER.
...THIS LI HAKU WAS INTRODUCED TO A STAR COURTESAN OF THE PLEASURE DISTRICT, WE WERE TOLD.
IN RETURN FOR BEING THE GIRL'S GUARAN-TOR...

I NEVER WOULD'VE GUESSED SHE HAD SUCH CONNEC-TIONS.
AHH, BEING YOUNG IS FRIGHT-ENING, INDEED.
WELL ...
THEN THERE'S THE MATTER OF WHAT MY MASTER MUST HAVE IMAGINED SHE MEANT BY HER WORDS...
...AND HURRYING TO SEE HER...
POM POM POM
SHWP
...AFTER PUSHING THROUGH HIS WORK AS FAST AS HE COULD...

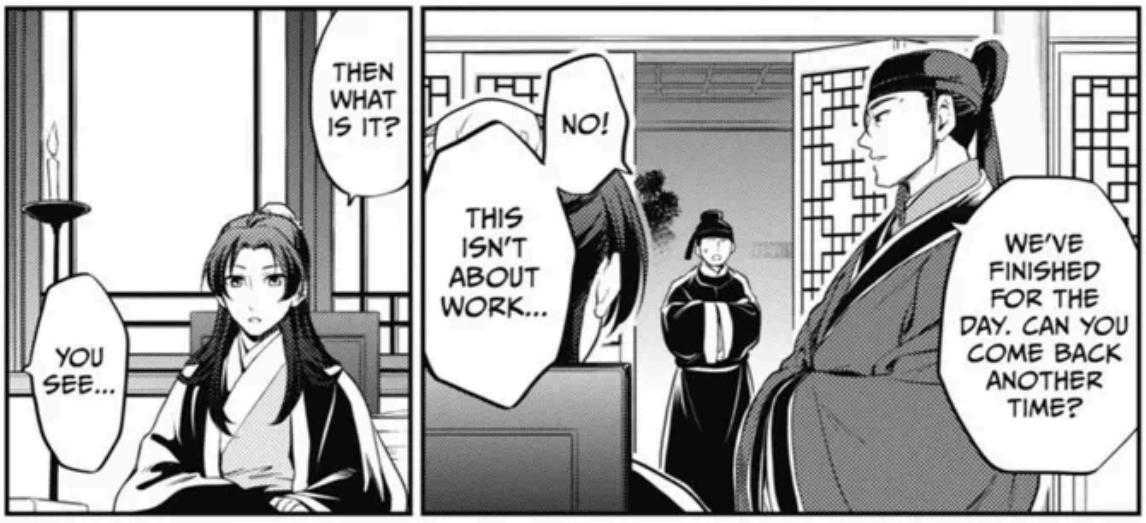
TO HIM, IT MUST HAVE SEEMED LIKE A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.
...HE DISCOVERED THAT SHE'D JOURNEYED HOME WITH SOME UNKNOWN FELLOW...

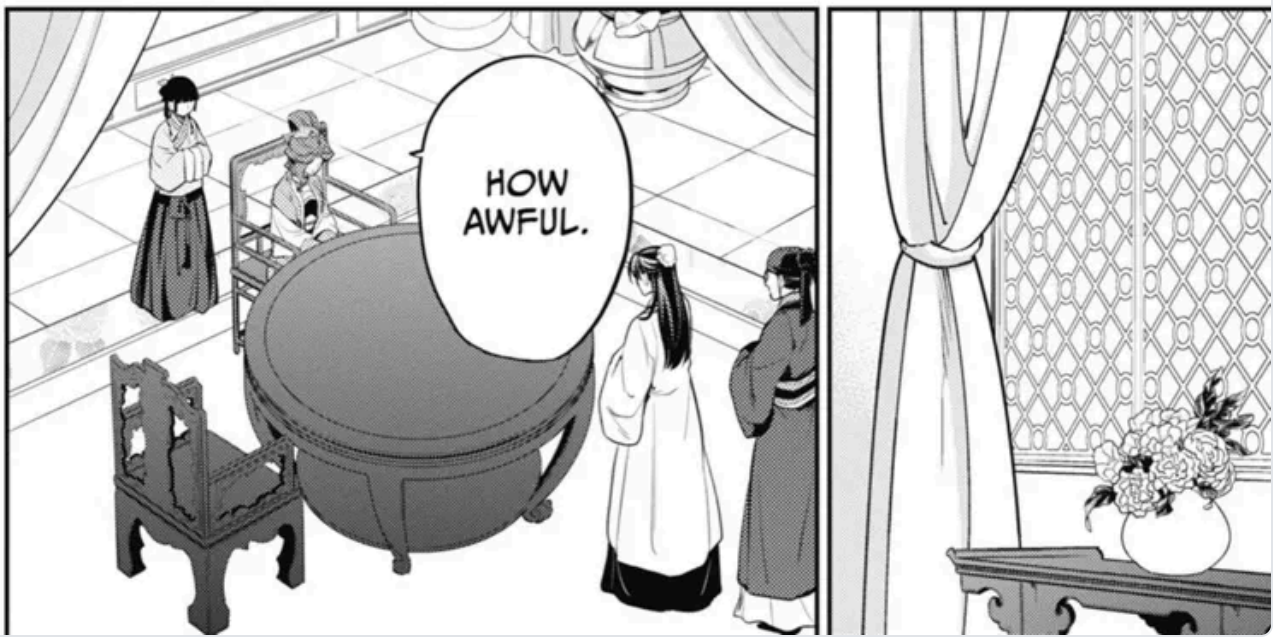
I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO KEEP PLACATING HIM FOREVER ...
むすっ
SULK


FWP

164

THERE ARE MANY MINISTERS WHO ARE OBVIOUSLY TRYING TO PASS MEASURES IN THEIR OWN SELF-INTERESTS.
I DO WISH HE WOULD THINK A LITTLE HARDER ABOUT HIS WORK.
...IS TRULY A PITY.
THAT MY YOUNG MASTER'S WORKLOAD CONTINUES TO GROW BECAUSE OF THEM...
KNOCK
KNOCK
I DO BEG YOUR PAR-DON, SIRS.

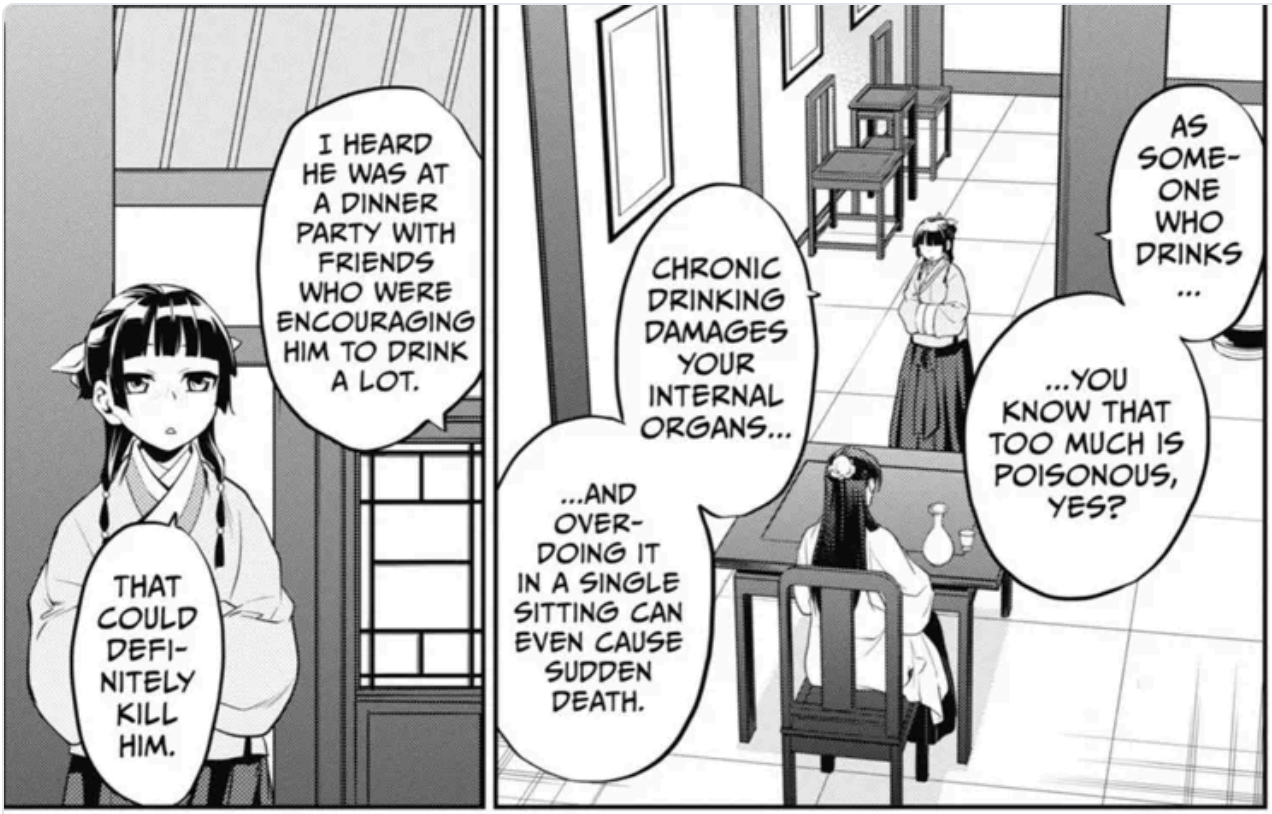

THEN WHAT IS IT?
YOU SEE...
NO!
THIS ISN'T ABOUT WORK...
WE'VE FINISHED FOR THE DAY. CAN YOU COME BACK ANOTHER TIME?


HOW AWFUL.

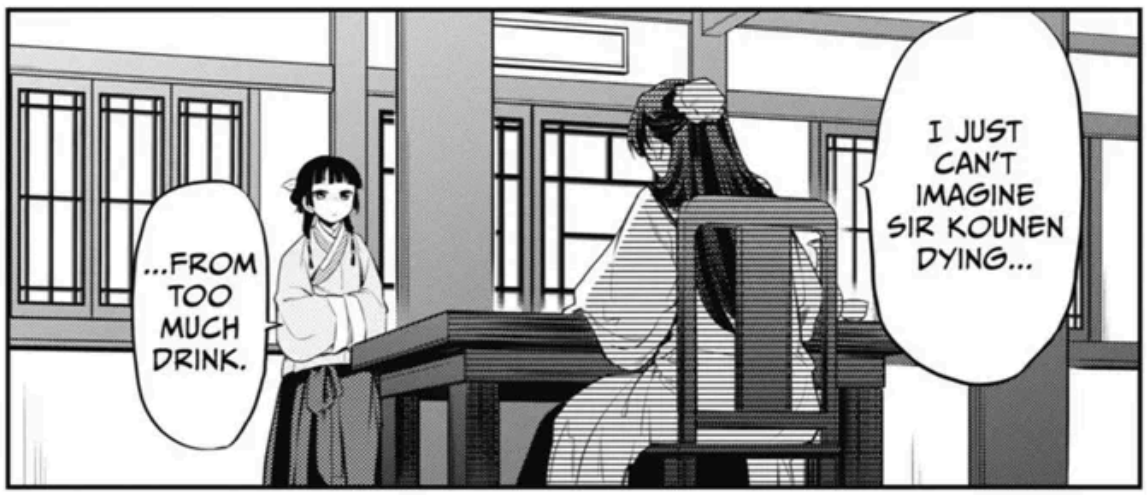
SEEMS SOME BIG SHOT DIED.
HE DIED FROM DRINKING TOO MUCH ALCOHOL.
YOU ABSO-LUTELY REAP WHAT YOU SOW.
HIS NAME WAS KOUNEN, AND HE WAS IN HIS FIFTIES.
FROM WHAT I HEARD...
...HE WAS A LIVELY AND KIND-HEARTED WARRIOR.
AS THE LOWLY NEW GIRL, THIS SHOULD BE NO BUSINESS OF MINE ...
...BUT THERE'S A RULE THAT EUNUCHS MAY NOT SPEAK TO A CONSORT WITHOUT ONE OF HER ATTENDANTS PRESENT...
...SO HERE I AM.
AND ...

DO YOU THINK IT'S TRUE?
ちら、
GLANCE
...MR. HIGH-AND-MIGHTY SENT THE HEAD LADY OUT ON AN ERRAND TELLS ME...
...THE FACT THAT...
I KNEW IT.
UGH.
DO YOU REALLY THINK THE CAUSE OF DEATH WAS ALCOHOL?

LIQUOR CAN KILL YOU IN A NUMBER OF WAYS.


I HEARD HE WAS AT A DINNER PARTY WITH FRIENDS WHO WERE ENCOURAGING HIM TO DRINK A LOT.
THAT COULD DEFI-NITELY KILL HIM.
CHRONIC DRINKING DAMAGES YOUR INTERNAL ORGANS...
...AND OVER-DOING IT IN A SINGLE SITTING CAN EVEN CAUSE SUDDEN DEATH.
AS SOME-ONE WHO DRINKS ...
...YOU KNOW THAT TOO MUCH IS POISONOUS, YES?

BUT HE ONLY DRANK HALF HIS USUAL AMOUNT.

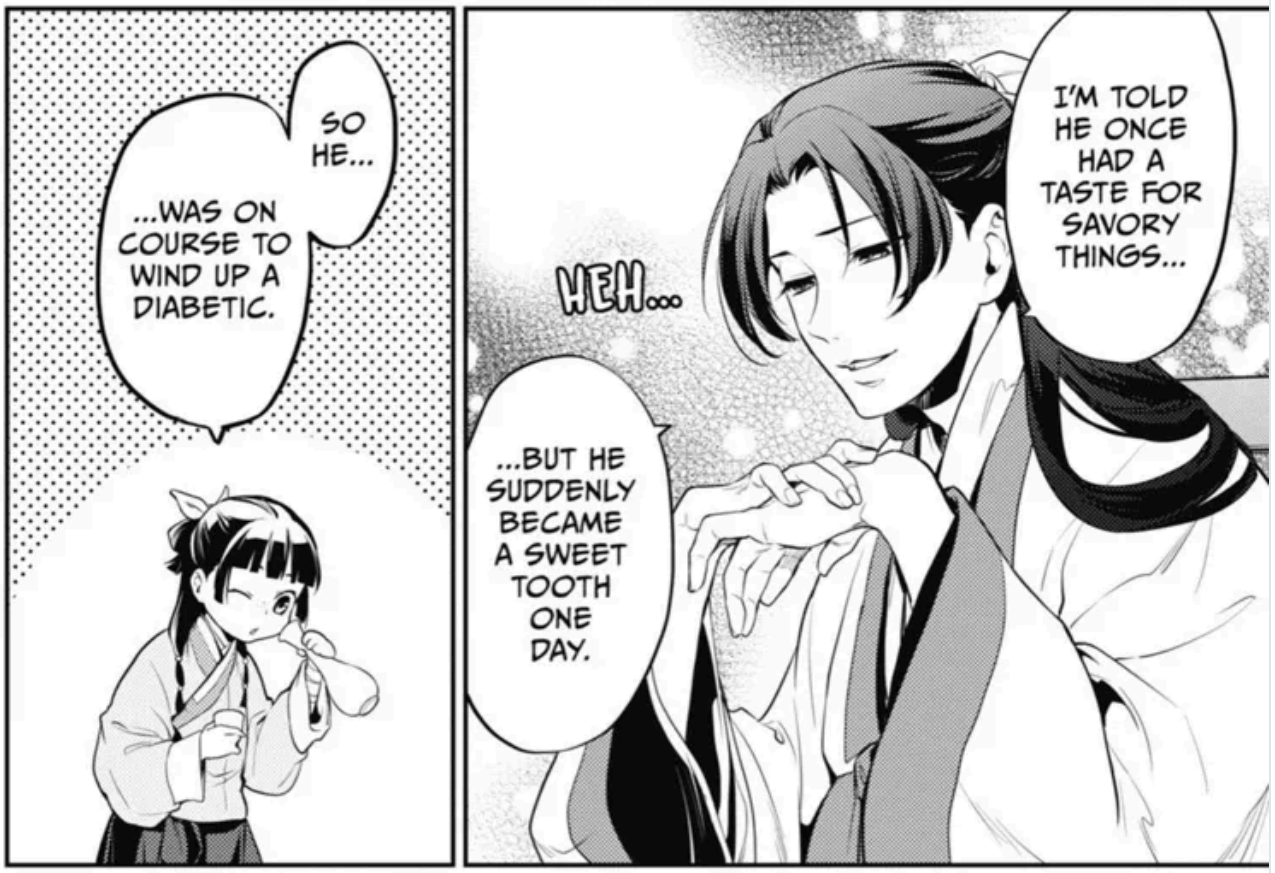

...FROM TOO MUCH DRINK.
I JUST CAN'T IMAGINE SIR KOUNEN DYING...

THIS IS WHAT'S LEFT OF THE LIQUOR FROM THE DINNER.
OOH, ALCO-HOL!
SHP
THE VESSEL FROM WHICH HE'D BEEN DRINKING HAD TOPPLED OVER, AND NOT A DROP WAS LEFT.
SO...
...THERE'S NO WAY TO TELL IF HIS DRINK HAD BEEN POISONED.
IT IS AS YOU SAY.
170

I CAN HANDLE HIS USUAL ARROGANT, BOSSY SELF BETTER, THOUGH.
IS IT BECAUSE HE GETS THAT THIS IS A LOT TO ASK?
HE'S BEING MEEK.
くいっ
SIP
?
IT TASTES AS IF SALT HAS BEEN ADDED TO A SWEET LIQUOR.
THIS IS AN UNUSUAL FLAVOR.

171

HE'D NEVER REACH FOR SMOKED MEATS OR SALT, EVEN IF THEY'D BEEN LAID OUT.
HE LIKED HIS ALCOHOL AND EVEN HIS DRINKING SNACKS TO BE SWEET.
SIR KOUNEN HAD A SWEET TOOTH.
IT'S SWEET, RIGHT?


SO HE...
...WAS ON COURSE TO WIND UP A DIABETIC.
I'M TOLD HE ONCE HAD A TASTE FOR SAVORY THINGS...
WEH...
...BUT HE SUDDENLY BECAME A SWEET TOOTH ONE DAY.

GLUB
BLUB
BLUB
HEY!
ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO DRINK MORE OF THAT?
WOULD YOU NOT SHATTER MY NOSTALGIC REVERIE WITH TALK OF REALITY PLEASE?

DID THEY PUT OUT ANY SALT OR SALTY FOODS AT THIS DRINKING PARTY?
YES. I HEAR THEY SERVED ROCK SALT, MOONCAKES, AND CURED MEAT.
SIP
SO HE WENT FROM ENJOYING SALT AND SPICE TO BEING A SWEET TOOTH, HMM?
SHOULD I HAVE THOSE PRE-PARED?
NO, NO.
I'LL BE DONE WITH THIS BY THE TIME THEY'RE READY.
UH, THAT'S NOT WHY I WAS ASKING .....
ピチョ... DRIP
CAN YOU PROCURE THE JUG SIR KOUNEN WAS DRINKING FROM?
THE SHARDS OF IT, YES.
THAT WILL DO.

PHEW...
OH, AND...
...I WOULD LIKE YOU TO LOOK INTO FOR ME.
...THERE IS ONE MORE THING...